

Written testimony in support of HB 5372
Stephney Gonzalez
Milford, CT

My name is Stephney Gonzalez and I live in Milford, CT. I fully support HB 5372: An Act Concerning Dyslexia Instruction offered in Teacher Preparation Program. I currently coach teachers as a Mentor for Literacy How and serve as the Fellowship Director in the Reading and Language Development Program at Fairfield University where I am also pursuing a Sixth Year Certificate in the program.

In my previous professional life as a kindergarten and first grade teacher, I was wholly unprepared to teach children who did not acquire reading “naturally” despite holding a state certification and Masters’ degree. Strugglers struggled for two years in my multi-age classroom before they moved up to second grade where they fell even further behind, until they were eventually recommended for Special Education and given the label “learning disabled”. This label only entitled them to services in the resource room, where literacy instruction typically mirrored that in general education classrooms. Students were given leveled, uncontrolled text where they were encouraged to use the pictures to guess at unfamiliar words or to memorize a list of “sight words” and then apply those memorized words to the text reading. My 4 and 5 year old students were asked to read words like “museum, astronaut, thought and choice” using strategies like self-questioning: “what would make sense?” It barely made sense to me, but I didn’t know any better and continued on with business as usual.

Phonemic awareness and phonics instruction was not emphasized, nor implemented, even in my classroom of young, developing readers. I didn’t know how the sounds of our language related to spelling and reading. I didn’t know how regular and rule-abiding the English language actually is. I was encouraged to teach them to spell as they wrote in the context of a writer’s workshop. If the child wanted to write “boy”, that was the moment to teach him that /oy/ is spelled “-oy”. I quickly noticed that my students would choose words like “good” because they were more comfortable with spelling them, rather than a more robust word like “delicious”. The lack of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction directly translated into poorer reading and writing for my young students. Now knowing that up to 20% of the population may be dyslexic, I often wonder how many of my students would have been labeled as such, received more appropriate services and become successful readers.

Despite my struggling students, I was repeatedly told I was a masterful teacher and received high scores in my evaluations. The underlying suggestion was this was the students’ problem, not mine.

Unfortunately, we don't know what we don't know, so I was woefully unaware at how underprepared I was to teach these young readers. In fact, it wasn't their problem: it was mine and, by extension, the fault of my teacher preparation programs. My undergraduate and graduate degrees neglected to include courses on Dyslexia or Structured Literacy practices for supporting student with Dyslexia. In fact, they neglected to teach me *how* to teach students to read, especially struggling students and students with Dyslexia.

Now, I know better, so I do better. I coach teachers in utilizing Structured Literacy practices where students are taught the sounds, spellings, sentence structures and words of our language explicitly and systematically. They are not left alone to guess. I am pursuing a degree in the Reading and Language Development at Fairfield University which teaches candidates to use these Structured Literacy practices in all tiers of instruction while also teaching them how to screen and identify students for Dyslexia.

Teaching our youngest readers and writers the structures of our language provides them with the strong foundation necessary to develop into proficient readers. Many dyslexic students who are identified earlier and given appropriate instruction can also learn to read proficiently. Students who are proficient readers are more likely to finish school, attend college and pursue careers or jobs which afford them their desired quality of life. Higher education preparation which includes coursework on Dyslexia and teaching students with Dyslexia gives teachers the tools necessary to close our tremendous achievement and opportunity gaps. I think about my former struggling students and wonder where they are and what they are doing. Although I now know the fault lies with my teacher preparation programs, I still feel guilt. If only I had known.